

Fantasy that is blessed by Stark reality

LIAM FAY



Game of Thrones
Sky Atlantic, Mon

Fearless
UTV, Mon / TV3, Wed

Friends From College
Netflix

False faces are a mug's game. Movies and TV shows about heroes or villains who pull off astounding identity changes by just pulling on masks are almost always terrible – barefaced insults to the audience's intelligence. Compelling action-adventure needs swashbuckling characters with steely minds, not larky pranksters with detachable noses.

As with many other cheap storytelling tricks, however, the humble mask has been given an audacious facelift by **Game of Thrones**, the megahit fantasy epic that has entered its penultimate and seventh season.

The series opened with a bravura show of backstabbing and face-swapping. Raddled despot Walder Frey (David Bradley) hosts a feast to congratulate his henchmen for brutally murdering most of his enemies in the Stark clan. Frey raises a toast and exhorts his followers to drain their goblets. But the wine is poisoned and the men are soon keeling over in agony. Suddenly, Frey unpeels a mask to reveal Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), erstwhile hothead now icily hell-bent on avenging her family.

Arya's mastery of disguise and anger management have

been hard won. She spent a gruelling internship with the Faceless Men, a religiously inspired guild of shape-shifting assassins who use faces sliced from their victims as transformative masks. Arya has been schooled in the techniques underpinning this cult of death and dead ringers. We don't understand any of it, of course, but we can be sure Arya knows exactly what she's doing.

Meticulously layered backstories are a GoT trademark. It can be shockingly profligate with plot and characters but painstakingly detailed in its assembly of props and defences for the central storyline. Monday's edition was essentially a tension-building exercise; little happened and much of what was said involved recap. Nevertheless, there was a palpable sense of the screw being tightened.

Most fantasy dramas are boring, not because they are excessively fantastical but because they lack confidence in their own conceits. Their writers don't really believe in the phantasms they're conjuring up, so they can't make anyone else do so. The stories remain stubbornly earthbound: plodding, hesitant, pedestrian.

GoT is hokum with conviction, nonsense on the sturdiest of stilts. At a time when the quality of would-be high-quality TV seems to be slipping, the series is maintaining high standards, still offering a finely balanced blend of fantasy and reality, CGI and live action, spectacle and drama. More

impressively still, as the end nears, it's also retaining its composure.

Decomposition was the defining feature of **Fearless**, a conspiracy thriller



that lost the plot long before last week's finale. Launched amid much hoopla, the six-part drama was billed as a British version of *Homeland*. It was written by Patrick Harbinson, a British screenwriter whose credits include the American version of *Homeland*. Helen McCrory was the lead in *Fearless*, Michael Gambon among its baddies. Classiness and intelligence appeared to be the venture's watchwords.

Unfortunately, the hoopla was a false-flag operation. *Fearless* was hopeless, a mishmash of half-baked student politics and overcooked legal melodrama.

McCrory played Emma Banville, a lawyer by profession and social justice warrior by vocation. Banville's anti-establishment principles make her a sucker for lost causes, but ultimately she's on the side of the angels. We

“ Game of Thrones is hokum with conviction, nonsense on sturdy stilts

know this because she chain-smokes roll-ups and despatches vodka shots like gumdrops. She is also desperate to adopt a child and enjoys a jocularly soppy relationship with boyfriend Steve (the comedian John Bishop making a fair fist of straight-ish acting).

Banville triggers a ferocious backlash when she tries to exonerate the hapless stiff wrongfully convicted of

murdering a schoolgirl on a US military base more than 14 years ago. Her investigation brings her into violent conflict with American and British spooks who fear the “real reasons” for the Iraq war are about to be exposed.

Banville also incurs the wrath of Islamist hitmen, puppet politicians and dodgy cops, all united only by their devotion to chronic overacting. Banville prevails through ruses and hunches that would have been deemed far-far-fetched by the writers of *Scooby-Doo*.

Belief in conspiracy theories is the world's fastest-growing religion. Detecting grand design in random events allows the impressionable/stupid to create a semblance of order from chaos. This widespread retreat from reality is already having serious political consequences. Drama is well

equipped to explore this cockeyed worldview, but *Fearless* opted to indulge it.

Friends From College is a virtually laugh-free sitcom about a group of Harvard alumni coping with midlife angst. Unlikeable characters are not necessarily an impediment to great comedy; *Seinfeld* featured some of the most narcissistic and petulant protagonists in TV history. But the issue with these bleating prima donnas is that they are charmless, self-pitying and dumb in an unengaging way.

Created by Nicholas Stoller and his wife, the novelist Francesca Delbanco, the series dings and clacks with the pinballing of cultural hot-buttons from the 1990s. The soundtrack features Pavement, the Sundays and Hanson while the cast includes Fred “The Wonder Years” Savage as well as a bloke from Ally McBeal. There

are running gags about Monica Lewinsky.

What the show conspicuously lacks is comic flair. *Friends From College* is sold as a more grown-up, worldly wise version of *Friends*, but the 1990s sitcom was smarter. Stoller and Delbanco evidently believe they have something profound to say about the passing of time but, after eight aimless episodes, all they seem to have is an uncanny knack for wasting it.

Game of Thrones chronicles things that never happened in an age that never existed. Remarkably, this baroque fantasy continues to say more about modern society and real life than many of the dramas and comedies that purport to be rooted in the here and now. So-called “realism” is sometimes the most fake mask of all. ■

CULTURE CULTURE EITHNE SHORTALL

Though a country with its own language and a competitive film industry, we have put ourselves forward for a best foreign language Oscar on a modest number of occasions. We've submitted only four films in total – and half of those weren't in Irish.

In 2006, the Academy Awards changed the rules to allow countries to enter films in a language other than their native tongue, so long as creative control was still held by people from the submitting country. Ireland's first submission, in 2007, was in Irish, though. *Kings*, about a group of Irish men living in London, failed to make the shortlist.

Next came *As If I Am Not There*, Juanita Wilson's 2010 Serbo-Croatian film about the Bosnian war. Four years later there was *An Bronntanas*, an Irish-language noir later divided into episodes for a TG4 mini-series. The only Irish entry to make the shortlist was *Viva*, Paddy Breathnach and Mark O'Halloran's tale of a Cuban boy who dreams of becoming a drag queen. *Viva* made the nine-strong shortlist in 2016 but, alas, wasn't among the final five nominees.

Most years, Ireland has no films to put forward. When we do have an eligible offering, it generally has no competition, so it's not surprising we lose out to countries such as Italy and France, which choose their best film from hundreds of eligible releases every year.

On rare occasions, Ifta – Ireland's selecting committee – is faced with a choice. The year *Viva* was chosen, there were two other Irish foreign-language films: *Moscow Never Sleeps*, a Russian-language film by an Irish director; and *An Klondike*, an Irish western also broadcast

Lost in translation
Pilgrimage may face Oscar dialogue issues

“ Ireland has submitted only four films for best foreign language Oscar

as a mini-series on TG4 and, later, Netflix.

At the time, Ifta said the notion that an Irish-language film should be given priority was a matter of opinion. “We would all be enthusiastic about [entering] an Irish-language film, but where does that leave other great films in the foreign language made by wholly Irish teams? It's good that it's fair,” said Áine Moriarty, Ifta's chief executive.

While Ireland had no eligible film for this year's Academy Awards, there is hope for next March. One candidate – and one with some chance of success – is *Pilgrimage*. Brendan Muldowney's medieval epic features monks travelling across 13th-century Ireland speaking Irish, Latin, French and English. A limited cinema release makes it

eligible, but someone does need to calculate how much English is in the film. The Oscar rules say at least 51% of dialogue must be in languages other than English, and while *Pilgrimage*'s producers pressed the creative team to make it at least 70% English, those working on it doubt they reached this.

Another unusual entry, and one being considered by Ifta, is *Rocky Ros Muc*. The film is in Irish, but it is also a documentary. It tells the story of Seán Mannion, a Galway boxer who left his Irish-speaking village for Boston, then the criminal domain of Whitey Bulger. It won best Irish documentary at the Galway Film Fleadh and the producers have agreed to wholly Irish teams? There is precedent for a documentary entry; Italy submitted one for this year's Oscars.

Even if *Rocky Ros Muc* doesn't get Ifta's backing as Ireland's foreign language entry, it will have another shot at an Oscar. The film is getting a short release in New York and Los Angeles, which will allow it contend for best documentary. So we're not out of the running just yet. ■





Old-school scoundrels

LIAM FAY



The Young Offenders
BBC3

Gomorrah
Sky Atlantic, Wed

Give My Head Peace
BBC1, Fri

Vintage ideas and traditional values are the unlikely mainstays of **The Young Offenders**, an amusing but oddly quaint sitcom about high jinks among petty crooks in inner-city Cork. Though set amid an apparently desolate and very modern urban

landscape, the show is actually an upbeat celebration of old-school comedy shtick.

Cycle theft is the stock-in-trade of the eponymous teen tearaways – an almost endearingly primitive form of wheeler-dealing. Slapstick chases, involving fist-shaking cops and mask-wearing robbers, are another recurring trope that could have been borrowed from a silent-era movie.

Ultimately, however, the show's most old-fashioned feature is the hapless double act around which the action unfolds and the scenery frequently collapses: a union of amity and calamity that, at times, recalls Laurel and Hardy.

Conor (Alex Murphy) and Jock (Chris Walley) are the

dimmes of delinquents, the thickest of thieves. Though still at school, they regard themselves as criminal masterminds. “We own this city,” they trill, before busting some moves in a side alley. In reality, it is they who are owned at every turn. Their best-laid scams invariably backfire, and when they aren't running from the guards, they're covering from neighbourhood louts. They dance in side alleys because they aren't set foot on the main streets.

Conor and Jock are routinely derided as “scumbags”, often by their nearest and dearest. So their defiant cockiness is, in many ways, admirable. But they are also a classic comedy pairing: little and large, dumb and dumber. Jock is the lanky know-all who knows very little while Conor, the narrator, is the short guy with big ideas. Each leads the other astray.

The characters began life on the silver screen, in a low-budget 2016 caper about smuggled cocaine washing up

on the Cork coast. The plot was more ramble than romp, and eventually ran into the sand. But the secret of the movie's success was the comic partnership between Murphy and Walley, a two-hander that richly deserved a reprise.

The six-part TV series, also directed by Peter Foott, isn't so much a follow-up as a second take. Several scenes were restaged versions of scenes from the movie. Repeating good ideas is understandable but we get reshapes of jokes that were less than brilliant first time round – a worrying vote of

“They're a classic comedy pairing: little and large, dumb and dumber”

low confidence in the team's powers of comic invention.

The sitcom benefits greatly from a strong supporting cast. Hilary Rose is particularly good as Conor's inventively foul-mouthed mother. PJ Gallagher, miscast as a deranged drug-dealer in the movie, makes a better fist of Barry Walsh, hot-tempered principal of the pair's school who discovers his daughters are being wooed by the gruesome twosome.

Stan and Ollie aren't the only iconic double act to cast a shadow; some of the more wistful conversations of Conor and Jock recall the doomed junkies in Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam & Paul*. Older viewers might hear echoes of Cha and Miah, Leaside political philosophers from back in the day. Murphy and Walley have clearly worked hard to endow their comic creations with nuance and depth; it's a pity the sitcom doesn't always rise to a similar standard.

Living long enough to become “young offenders”

would be a dream outcome for most of the kids in **Gomorrah**, the grimly compelling Italian mob drama that has returned for a third season. There is nothing remotely glamorous about the gangsterism depicted by this fictionalised adaptation of Roberto Saviano's tell-all book about the feuding clans of the Neapolitan Camorra. Nobody dresses sharply or dispenses wiseass one-liners. For the foot soldiers, there are no fancy cars, no adoring molls, no code of honour. Just guns, drugs and death.

Staying alive becomes a full-time job but without long-term prospects. Life is especially nasty, brutish and short for the young. Boys of 14 and 15 are deployed as couriers, messengers, assassins. They receive their first payment after about 20 successful missions, but only a small minority make it that far.

Nevertheless, there's no shortage of

volunteers from the slums of Naples, each determined to make a name for himself.

Gomorrah is undeniably bleak, and the remorseless carnage can be dizzying. However, it's extremely well written and disconcertingly addictive, an epic story told in tense, often adrenaline-charged, vignettes. Never before has TV drama so convincingly conveyed the paranoia and panic of gang warfare from the inside.

Northern Ireland may be at peace but there's still no end in sight to the brutal war on comedy waged by **Give My Head Peace**, the would-be satirical sitcom that has just concluded an embarrassingly pointless three-episode run. Witless quips, feeble barbs and neon-lit smugness are nothing new from the Hole in the Wall Gang, the Belfast troupe responsible for this most enduringly tragic of cultural atrocities. But what made the latest series so astonishingly dire was that it was billed as a “comeback” – the first significant presentation of “new” TV material since the show was cancelled in 2007, about a decade after it ceased to function as an even semi-intelligent riposte to the idiocies of the Troubles.

The return was, presumably, conceived as a forum for withering polemic about the political stalemate that has prevailed since Stormont's collapse. In truth, however, the only withering on display was the accelerated decomposition of a long-dead comic enterprise.

Far from showcasing fresh ideas or renewed energy, the recent editions remade all the old mistakes, at maximum volume. The dialogue was little more than a screechy exchange of tribal insults and catchphrases, delivered with “wacky” voices and eyebrow-wagging facetiousness. The only notable innovation was the use of incendiary special effects: deliberate diversions, perhaps, from the stink bomb of a script.

Parroted sectarian claptrap does not amount to parodying it. The Ulster quarrel is notoriously ancient but **Give My Head Peace** is almost equally outdated. ❏



CULTURE CULTURE EITHNE SHORTALL

My boyfriend and I recently had one of those roaring arguments that starts about something small — such as, oh, I don't know, whether or not to buy Christmas presents — and ends up as a loud inventory of each other's irritating habits.

At one point he took issue with how I never get rid of books, pointing to a couple of novels he knows I hated. I counter-accused with a dramatic riffle through the yellowing newspaper supplements he won't throw out because he plans to read them, one day.

Anyway, there's nothing like a bit of perspective. Last week I was given a tour of the National Library of Ireland, which has been given approval for a €10m four-year refurbishment.

Katherine McSharry, head of services at the library, estimates it collects 8,000 physical newspapers and 4,000 books each year. It is obliged to keep a copy of every newspaper and book published in Ireland, as well as those produced outside the country with a domestic interest. At least I retain only the ones I've read.

Most of the approved

Space odyssey *The National Library is spending millions to sort out its storage issues*

“It is obliged to keep a copy of every book and newspaper published in Ireland. At least I retain only the ones I've read”

renovations are about increasing and enhancing on-site storage — which the library needs more of with every passing day. As to whether it needs to retain a copy of every newspaper published in Ireland, its director, Sandra Collins, points out that she stored her PhD on a floppy disk and now has no way of accessing it. We know we can preserve physical paper, but a lot less is known about the longevity of digital storage.

The newspapers are probably what swung it for the library in terms of getting the €10m; they are held in a dank basement with open drains and a plugged-in dehumidifier. Some of the

newspapers are decades old and none has been digitised. This is the only version the library has, and the basement has no fire suppression.

No “fire suppression”, McSharry says, is a less frightening way of saying “no sprinklers or any way of putting out a fire”. If a blaze starts, the on-site books will also be done for. There is no temperature control but there are plenty of exposed wires. Blocking out the windows is the only way of protecting the thousands of tomes from light damage.

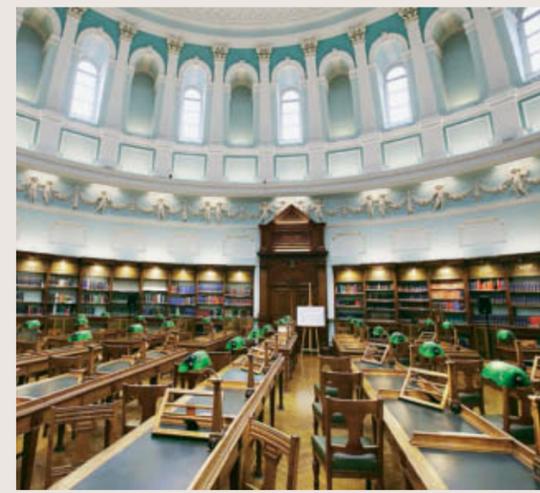
Books and newspapers are stored in the Victorian wing, which hasn't been updated since the institution was established in 1890. Meanwhile, the publicly accessible portion of the library — consisting of cafe, Yeats exhibition and lecture room — was refurbished in 2004 and is climate-controlled. The renovations will involve switching around the functions of the two wings. The books will be stored by size, to fit in as many as possible.

A Seamus Heaney exhibition, which opens at the Bank of Ireland building on College Green in July, will eventually make its way to the library. The exhibition is built around the library's extensive archive of Heaney's papers and will feature original manuscripts, unpublished works, letters and diaries.

WB Yeats's personal library lines the walls of Collins's office on Kildare Street. When Collins first got her job, people asked why she was whispering in her own office. “Because of the books,” she explained.

The impressive collection instils a degree of reverence. A quick peruse shows Yeats's penchant for anthologies of Irish writing; William Blake; a bit of Chaucer; and copies of his own publications. There are also books he borrowed but didn't return.

Clearly, Yeats didn't face the same storage problems as the rest of us. ❏



SAM BOAL/ROLLINGNEWSIE



NIKE CATHERO

Furrows in fallow land

LIAM FAY



Alison Spittle's *Culchie Club* RTE2, Mon

Big Week on the Farm RTE1, Mon-Fri

Hardy Bucks RTE2, Thu

Rural whimsy is one of RTE's most reliable cash crops. Cheap to produce, sweetly flavoured and easy on the eye, jaunty salutes to the endearing simplicity of country life are a year-round programming staple. For viewers who actually inhabit the provinces, however, most

of these shows leave a corny aftertaste.

Alison Spittle's *Culchie Club* was billed as an attempt to plough a little deeper. The eponymous comedian, who was born in London but grew up in the Irish midlands, toured the sticks on a mission to meet as many awkwardly "proud" countryfolk as possible while she endeavoured to understand what they mean when they talk about rural pride. From the outset, therefore, the programme suggested that culchie talk can be an impenetrable babble that requires deciphering.

Celebrity travelogues packaged as "emotional journeys" are one of contemporary TV's most laughable clichés but, in

fairness, there was a genuine rationale for Spittle's odyssey. Though regarded by her city friends as an archetypal redneck, she sees herself as a cosmopolitan urbanite, and friction between both sides of this identity split provided the spark that ignited her comedy career.

Spittle was seven when her family settled in Westmeath, her mother's native county. She arrived in Ballymore with a chip on her shoulder and a target on her back, "sounding like a little Danny Dyer". For self-preservation, she shed the cockney accent, replacing it with an improvised approximation of laconic local cadences. While her speech changed, her mindset did not.

"Instead of embracing the culchie lifestyle, I shunned it," she said. Looking back, she regrets her blinkered disdain. It blinded her to the richness and rich curiosity of midlands' culture. Back then, she felt "trapped" by Ballymore but, today, she feels guilty that she allowed her hometown to become a

penitentiary. Spittle used these contradictions as fuel for *Nowhere Fast*, her sporadically inspired sitcom about a smartass millennial who slinks back to the provincial family home when her Dublin life goes awry. Consequently, there were many moments when it felt as though the documentary was retilling old terrain.

Rural Ireland has never been a homogenous place. To the unsophisticated ear of the insular city-slicker, culchies might have strange accents,

“We’re invited to see country dwellers as clodhopping clowns who’d do anything for a laugh

but we certainly do not all speak with one voice. Spittle's expressions of surprise at her discovery that country people come in many shapes and sizes seemed stogy and unconvincing. Moreover, there is something irredeemably dated about the debate over whether it is city or country values that best represents "the real Ireland". In truth, we are almost all suburbanites now.

Despite the occasional hokiness, Spittle emerged as an energetic and engaging presenter. Her sharpest interviews were with Kerry stand-up Shane Clifford and Cavan comic Kevin McGahern, fellow hillbillies turned chuckle-hucksters. Whatever its other distinguishing features might be, rural Ireland seems to be an unrivalled breeding ground for dry-witted comedians.

Though an entertaining romp, as a journalistic venture *Culchie Club* took a wrong turn early on and never regained its sense of direction. There were too many

The rural whimsy propagated by RTE is a strange mix of metropolitan condescension and back-to-nature piety, a credo rife with inconsistencies. One tenet is that simple farming life is the highest form of existence, a spiritual pathway untainted by the sin, squalor or superficiality of the urban treadmill. At the same time, we are invited to view country dwellers as clodhopping clowns, feckless funsters who'd do anything for a laugh. *BWOTF* overdoses on both hallucinatory myths.

Each night featured a celebrity guest presenter, an indispensable labour-saving device on any busy farm. Fake laughter and forced banter filled and indeed fouled the air – no mean trick at the height of slurry-spreading season. As ever, the centrepiece of every celeb's involvement was Pull the Udder One, a cow-milking challenge performed to a collective singalong rendition of the title ditty. Livestock meets laughing stock.

Darkness on the edge of town is the setting and subject matter of *Hardy Bucks*, the gleefully seedy and defiantly lo-fi sitcom about the nefarious antics of lounge lizards, barflies and dirt-birds in a fictional Mayo conurbation. The fourth series, just concluded, has been the best.

Boredom and disappointment have always been the show's preoccupations. At times, its evocation of small-town claustrophobia was almost too authentic. Each episode comprised long stretches of tedium relieved by outbreaks of startling weirdness or gut-punching hilarity. The quality of the writing has improved but the troupe can still hit bum notes with uncanny ferocity and frequency. Amateurish acting by several main players remains a grievous distraction.

For all its faults, however, *Hardy Bucks* serves as a much-needed corrective to the increasingly sanitised and sanctified depiction of provincial life: the worm inside the bud, the grit beneath the whimsy. 🐛



MEDIA PLAYER JOHN BURNS

Here in the Dublin office of *The Sunday Times*, we like nothing better than a philosophical discussion on the finer points of journalistic ethics. Happily, a chance for editors to stroke their chins and use phrases like "morally justified" and "ethically dubious" has just presented itself.

It followed the appearance of Séamus Woulfe, the attorney general, at a private lunch hosted by the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) last month. During a speech – which everyone agrees was on the record – Woulfe declared the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill a "dog's dinner". It is rare for an attorney general to express an opinion in public, let alone such a colourful one.

The remark duly appeared in national newspapers, reported by the handful of working journalists present at the lunch.

Now, any reporters worth their salt would immediately wonder whether Woulfe had delivered himself of any other controversial views. Indeed he had. During a question-and-answer session following his speech, he had speculated about the outcome of a Supreme Court challenge taken by Angela Kerins, a former chief executive of Rehab. A case involving the office of the attorney general.

Great story. But could it be reported? Unlike his speech, Woulfe's comment had been made under the Chatham House rule.

Chatham House, in London, is the headquarters of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, a think tank. Its rule – and there is but one – is designed to allow a free flow of ideas, so policies can be kicked about in frank discussions. First written in 1927, and revised in 1992 and 2002, the rule says that participants present at a

Behind closed doors
The Chatham House rule shields a speaker's identity

“Could we report what Woulfe told the lunch meeting? Definitely.

meeting "are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker may be revealed".

You can see how this rule would allow a panel of diplomats or policy makers to lose their inhibitions about putting forward ideas. How the Chatham House rule works when there's only one speaker is unclear, however.

Several sources at the AEJ lunch were happy to brief a *Sunday Times* reporter about what Woulfe had said. Were they in breach of the rule? Definitely. Would we be, by reporting what those sources told us? Definitely not. A key point is that no representative of *The Sunday*

Times was at the AEJ lunch – we're not very clubbable round here. Had a *Sunday Times* journalist been there, the newspaper collectively would have been bound by the rule.

The problem with the Chatham House rule, as with other unofficial codes of conduct used in journalism, is that few people really understand it. Some think it means you can't quote anything said at a meeting, so it becomes completely private. Not so. To repeat, you can report what was said but not who said it. (And that's surely impossible if there's only one speaker.)

There is similar confusion, even among journalists, as to what precisely "off the record" and "background" mean. One signifies that information can be used but not attributed; another that material cannot be published at all. But which is which?

The best definition of the Chatham House rule was given by Simon Walters, political editor of the *Mail on Sunday*. He said it really means: "We Chatham up and put it in the paper." Let the speaker beware. 🐛
@JohnBurnsST

